

Units of Possibility: The Reknit Revolution, Amy Twigger Holroyd, Rugby Art Gallery & Museum, 24 June–2 September 2017, Rugby, UK

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Units of Possibility: The Reknit Revolution, Amy Twigger Holroyd, Rugby Art Gallery & Museum, 24 June–2 September 2017, Rugby, UK

Reviewed by Ania Sadkowska, Coventry University, UK and Sarah Walker, Nottingham Trent University, UK

Introduction

The Units of Possibility: The Reknit Revolution in Rugby Art Gallery and Museum is the first major solo exhibition of the British knitwear designer-maker, and founder of the Keep & Share brand, Amy Twigger Holroyd. Stemming from her 2013 Ph.D. thesis entitled 'Folk fashion: Amateur re-knitting as a strategy for sustainability', the exhibition reflects on the creative opportunities of the process of reknitting. This includes transforming old or damaged knitwear garments into new pieces using customization techniques which Twigger Holroyd refers to as treatments, be it a minor alteration such as fixing a hole, or a major modification such as inserting a sleeve, adding frills or darts. The wide number of treatments makes the design and production possibilities endless in Twigger Holroyd's sustainable fashion strategy. Every stitch offers an exciting opportunity to create multiple and new interpretations – as conveyed explicitly by the title of the exhibition – Units of Possibility.

The primary aim of the exhibition is to share and promote various reknitting techniques to support individuals undertaking knitting projects. Within these settings, craft is embraced as an engaging, participatory skill-based inquiry for individual knitters to share and exchange stories of existing wardrobe pieces and to facilitate hacking, articulate co-creation, and foster sustainability (Fletcher 2016). By celebrating values and aspirations such as sharing creativity, local knowledge and community engagement, the exhibition is relevant not only to those interested in and already familiar with knitting techniques, but to wider audiences who are in opposition to mass-produced fashion based on the consumerist model. The exhibition is dedicated to the support of slower, more sustainable and emotionally meaningful ways of making and remaking clothing, utilizing co-constructed, authentic craft knowledge and practices.

Overview

The exhibition opens with a large-scale diagram titled Reknit Spectrum (Figure 1). This visual representation summarizes the key findings of Twigger Holroyd's doctoral research. A simple white jumper is used to start the flow of the journey of the garment piece being changed using various reknitting techniques. The diagram maps out a number of procedures and treatments with as many as twelve potential pathways of development; each with a different reknitting strategy to follow closely in order to replicate the entire garment, add embellishment, pockets or cuffs, to more complex operations of inserting panels or transforming a jumper into a cardigan. The integrative character of the twelve reknitted jumpers on display with each illustrating a potential path for reconstruction based on materiality and tactility makes this schematic representation a challenging yet accessible invitation for knitters or craft-makers to embark on a journey of re-contextualizing existing knitted garments. Furthermore, the diagram is a well-crafted and a well-executed example of disseminating a piece of academic research that is transferrable and easily digestible for non-specialist viewers and the general public to appreciate, which is an impressive achievement in its own right.

The following two sections of the exhibition, Stitch-Hack and Cathedral Cardigans incorporated displays

of Twigger Holroyd's own creative craft practice using the reknitting treatments. The Stitch- Hack (Figure 2), corresponds to the name of one of the treatments that Twigger Holroyd has developed and it is certainly the most intriguing section of the exhibition. A series of five garments have been stitch-hacked meaning that these garments have been repaired by giving them new hidden meanings, showcasing a particularly nuanced form of customization, or even upcycling, of mostly mass produced and widely available garments. As the provided text informs the viewer, the author uses the technique to explore questions of ownership, and as Twigger Holroyd explained in her talk and tour exhibition event (Rugby Art Gallery and Museum; 29 July 2017), the idea behind stitch-hack is to 'repair something that doesn't need repairing'. A prime example of this is the red cardigan in which the structure was opened and a question of 'who made this?' was added. This seamlessly integrated message indeed is not only a visual statement of Twigger Holroyd's technical skills, but by being hidden at the back of the garment and barely visible at first glance, it provokes the viewer to ask a pertinent question of the origins of the garments we wear. And while this question has been explored by many contemporary practitioners such as Lucy Orta or Annemor Sundbø, it still remains unfulfilled and potent in terms of the answers we provide. Here, both the question and the answer are deliberately ambiguous, challenging the viewers' preconceptions of and relationships with objects surrounding them.

Positioned to face the Stitch-Hack section is the exposition entitled Cathedral Cardigans (Figure 3 left), which was inspired by the various construction details of gothic cathedrals. In terms of exploring the opportunities of how we claim of things that already exist around us, both sections are quite similar. Closely akin to the Stitch-Hack section, in Cathedral Cardigans, Twigger Holroyd has incorporated new design elements into existing garments, using techniques such as the aforementioned stitch-hacking. From all the series of exhibits on display this work seems to be the least conceptual, representing a more direct and straightforward translation of decorative visual research details into design work. Nevertheless, it is a beautiful display of the application of novel and innovative hand crafting techniques implemented via Twigger Holroyd's impressive knitting and crocheting skills.

The following exhibit was comprised of a set of garments reinvented by of group of local Rugby knitters developed during a series of workshops with Twigger Holroyd in Autumn 2016 (Figure 3 right). The garments created from the discarded mass-produced jumpers vary from cardigans and dresses, to hats and stockings, showcasing the use of different techniques and creative initiatives developed by the workshops participants. Supplemented by the personal diaries, photographs and testimonies from the knitters, this exposition documents the development of a supportive micro-community of reknitters, with the ambitious aspiration to trigger 'Rugby's own reknit revolution' (Units of Possibility: The Reknit Revolution, 2017). Similarly, Valentine et al. observe:

Advanced technologies are changing how we interact and what we interact with, but it cannot (yet) translate the emotional, sensorial and spiritual qualities of life and embed them into a textile design. A human being brings these human qualities to bear on materials. (2017: S964)

Indeed, what is compelling in this section of the exhibition is the convincing evidence of a particular work ethos based on the appreciation of a knitted structure for its cleverness and work that was put into producing it in the first place, making it a dynamic resource of inspiration, and attractive canvas for creative experimentations and a reinstating of 'these human qualities'.

The final section of the exhibition includes a film entitled Reknitting (Figure 4), which was created in

collaboration with filmmaker Jonathan Hamilton from Nottingham Trent University. The film is surrounded by a small knitting station which is open to the visitors. This particular space reflects the cooperation principles of the exhibition and includes a digital presence of Twigger Holroyd's personal encounters with some of the reknitting treatments. Displayed via three independent, yet fully coordinated windows we observe the knitter working on creating samples using three different techniques: cardiganize [sic], stitch-hack and replace cuff, available also via the corresponding website (Twigger Holroyd 2017b). The order in which the viewer sees the individual displays, with the final one being the film is not accidental; simply, by the time the viewer is exposed to it, even a complete knitting novice develops a basic understanding of the techniques involved allowing them not only to recognize each of the techniques, but to become fully immersed and hypnotized in watching Twigger Holroyd's embodied conversation with the material. This is a splendid conclusion to the show, which highlights that the exhibition is not only designed to showcase participation as a mode of research, but is a participatory and engaging event itself.

Conclusion

The Units of Possibility: The Reknit Revolution is an accomplished and informative exhibition. The key to its full appreciation is not to be misled by the title, which seems to draw our attention solely to knitting. The exhibition is not a display of knitwear pieces that we would expect to see at the catwalks of Sonia Rykiel or Missoni. Instead, it aims to extend how within our material culture we seek to identify more meaningful contemporary craft practices and to become more sustainable with our existing goods. What makes it so valid in the current socio-economic and political climate, is the use of a simple concept of reworking existing products to create new, more meaningful and emotionally resonant designs. As König (2013: 570) notes, '[i]t may be desirable for commodities to be designed in such a way that they can be mended, but consumers need to have the capacity and desire to repair and maintain these goods once they are in circulation'. In this vein, the exhibition is thought provoking and intellectually stimulating in the way it conveys craft as a discipline and as a spectrum of meaningful processes and formative possibilities (Hughes 2011). Individual skills and material awareness are celebrated, and embraced through facilitated sessions that encourage local wisdom and community participation. Twigger Holroyd's message seems to be that making is a dynamic and playful social affair which can make a difference to the way we produce, experience and consume our clothes. Consequently, this attitude offers a lens for viewers to understand knitting as a contemporary experiential framework of practices and unique approaches through which developing sustainable fashion practice and design becomes possible.

From a fashion perspective, reknitting becomes a driver for sustainability and change for how we value our existing goods within a world of highly political agendas towards mass production and mass-consumerism which supersede individuality, creativity, personal experience and interaction (Gwilt 2015). Themes that relate to this particular topic and debate are captured further by Twigger Holroyd in her recent book (2017a). One thing that is perhaps missing from the exhibition is the subjectivity of the craft practitioner towards gender and gender relations. Knitting is presented as an activity which can stimulate the need for inclusive local communities to participate and share stories over valued goods. But at the same time, the exhibition seems to suggest an entire absence of men within these communities of practice that involve craft led approaches with knitting (see e.g. [http:// www.menwhoknit.com/](http://www.menwhoknit.com/)). This, however is not surprising, taking into consideration the relative lack of social research focusing on men, and even a particular difficulty in recruiting them as study participants (Sadkowska 2016). This offers scope for the exhibition to extend its shared value incentives to increase participation of men in craft-based activities. The Reknit Spectrum in its current form becomes an essential tool to facilitate dialogue with potentially hard to reach audiences to engage in topics surrounding craft, sustainability and fashion.

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Figures



Figure 1: Reknit Spectrum, Amy Twigger Holroyd. Photograph by Ania Sadkowska.



Figure 2: Stitch-Hack, Amy Twigger Holroyd. Photograph by Ania Sadkowska.



Figure 3 (left to right): Cathedral Cardigans and Rugby Knitters, Amy Twigger Holroyd. Photograph by Ania Sadkowska.



Figure 4: Reknitting film, Amy Twigger Holroyd and Jonathan Hamilton. Photograph by Ania Sadkowska.